EXPERIMENTAL FEEDING OF "FREEZE HURT" HIBISCUS PLANTS

This article was sent in too late to be used in the Seed Pod last year after the freeze. We will run it now, but we hope that we do not have to try these experiments this year. - Editor.

Damage done to mature Hibiscus plants by the December freeze cannot yet be fully evaluated, however, some plants which had been given up for dead are indicating some evidence of life remaining in the root systems (late February 1963). Whether such plants can be "brought back" is still questionable but evidence is accumulating which indicates possible hope. Results of experiments now in progress are passed along to readers of the Seed Pod so that those interested persons may, if they wish, follow the steps which seem to be obtaining results. Please understand that results are, as of this writing, inconclusive and it will be several months before definite proof can be established and actual findings summarized.

Where plants begin to put forth slight leaf growth at or near ground level (in grafted plants this growth indication must be above the graft joint) severe root pruning appears to aid materially in promoting this growth. This is done by driving a sharp spade to full spade depth in a circle 14 to 18 inches around main stem of the plant. Spade should be inserted vertically so that deep roots directly under the plant are not disturbed. A fully soluble plant food is then applied to the leaves showing. Use at or slightly below manufacturer's recommended solution strength. This may be sprayed or brushed lightly onto the leaves and repeated at three to five day intervals. After second foliare feeding all unsound wood should be pruned away using extremely sharp pruning shears or saws. The cut should be immediately painted with a pruning paint containing copper napthenate (to avoid infection). Diagonal cut should be made and usually it will be found that sound wood does not extend much more than an inch above new growth area.

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If proper plant food is being used (11-21-26 formulation) darkening of new leaf growth should be noted by the third or fourth day following second foliare feeding. Once dark, natural color of new leaves has been obtained, root saturation may be begun using plant food at manufacturer's recommended solution strength. Feed twice weekly alternating foliare and root zone feeding. If beds are properly drained root zone saturation should be achieved, at roughly 25 gallons of feeding solution per 100 square feet of bed area.

Once sound growth is definitely established alternate feeding of root zone and foliare may be continued on a twice weekly basis so long as the plant does not show signs of "overfeeding". Should this occur feeding should be cut down or withheld and if one wishes to have soil tests made, if nitrogen content of the soil prove too high thorough leaching can be accomplished by watering to root zone saturation followed about an hour later by three to five times normal amount of watering. If nitrogen remains too high, level can be temporarily dropped by applying 5 pounds of granulated sugar per 100 square feet of bed area and lightly watered in.

Root pruning appears to assist plant recovery, probably by eliminating damaged and "sick" hair roots which are too far away from the main root system to be of real help in feeding at this stage of recovery. Plant food used should be of special formulation for Hibiscus, should be completely soluble and contain not only major elements but all known traces and micros required by Hibiscus. Formulation should contain chelating and sequestering agents to insure proper "take up" of foods in proper form and in addition should include "buffers" to avcid too rapid absorption along with penetrants to assist assimilation by the plant.

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